RELIGION AND DRAMA:
FRIENDS OR ENEMIES?

By

Fred Eastman

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Being a brief account of their historical connection and their present relation

By

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PROFESSOR OF RELIGIOUS LITERATURE
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THE CHICAGO THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

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RELIGION AND DRAMA: FRIENDS OR ENEMIES?

Religion and *drama* are two of the most provocative words in the English language. Link the two together and there is no telling what may happen. To avoid premature violence, therefore, it might be well to begin by defining our terms. Religion is that creative power which a man may grasp and by which he can transform his own life and the life around him from chaos to order, from stagnation to growth, from ugliness to beauty, and from selfishness to love. Drama is the art by which the struggles of the human soul are mirrored upon a stage. Religion, as Matthew Arnold said, is the life of God in the human soul. Drama is the mirror of that soul.

Defining our terms in this way, the theme of this discussion becomes inevitable. Since religion at its best is engaged in a dramatic struggle to transform human life, and since drama at its best is a mirror reflecting the struggles of the soul, we may expect to find religion and drama at their best working together as friends. But religion is not always at its best. In some of its varieties it seeks to escape from the human struggle, to turn away from the attempt to transform human life here and now and to fix attention upon some other world. It becomes then a sort of spiritual fire-escape.

Similarly drama is not always at its best. In some of its varieties it makes no attempt whatever to mirror human life, but regards its only function as entertainment and the provision of a means of forgetting the struggle. This sort of drama easily takes the short cut to pleasure by way of licentiousness and sensationalism. In the end it kills itself and the theater as well. It is a frail flower that dies when its deeper roots are cut off. We may expect to find religion of the escape variety quarreling with drama of the escape variety, for one seeks to escape in the direction of heaven, the other in the opposite direction by a primrose path. To show how religion and drama have helped each other when they have worked together and have suffered when they worked against each other, and how they may be of mutual assistance in the crisis which each faces to-day—such is our theme.

The story of how they have helped each other in times past and what happened when they fell apart and quarreled can be told by a series of snap-shots. The first is in an ancient Greek temple, the temple of Dionysus, in the fourth century before Christ. Picture an audience of 20,000 Athenians and others sitting for six days in the great amphitheater of that temple witnessing the production of twenty-five or thirty plays—and you picture the greatest experiment in adult religious education which the world has ever seen. Those plays were no commercial project of the Greeks, nor were they esthetic only. To the Greeks those plays were the principal means of cultivating the spiritual and ethical life. The state supported the dramatic contests and regarded them as so important that during the productions all business was abandoned, the law courts were closed, and prisoners

were even released from jail that they might profit by the spiritual stimulus of the plays. The poets who wrote those plays, the actors who played them, and the *choragi* who paid the cost of production were all looked upon as ministers of religion and their persons were held sacred and inviolable. The amphitheater itself possessed the sanctity of a temple. Any one who committed a misdemeanor in the temple during a play made himself liable not merely to the usual penalty for such an act, but to the penalty of death as having committed a sacrilege. These plays had developed gradually out of the songs and dances in honor of Dionysus, the god of wine and vegetation. In the course of time they developed into something far more important than an act of homage to a god, but they did not lose their essentially religious character and they continued to be acted in the temple, and at the season of the year regarded as most sacred. The interest of the people was so keen that more than half the entire population of Athens turned out to see the plays. And so successful did the state count the project that it maintained it for nearly five hundred years —until the Roman conquest of Greece. Here is our first example of religion and drama working together.

Now let us look at another picture—the picture of what happened to the drama of the Greeks when it was separated from religion. Our second picture is of a Roman theater of the second century. Rome has conquered Greece and has taken over Greek drama—but Rome is not interested in a drama which portrays the struggles of the soul or seeks to interpret the mysteries of life. She is interested only in a theater that provides an *escape* from life—something that will entertain,

arouse passions, provide thrills. And so the drama under Roman influence has become a bloody and obscene spectacle. Again you have thousands in an amphitheater—but they have not come to worship or to think. They have come to see gladiators fight, and wild animals turned loose upon helpless prisoners, and Christian martyrs burned as torches around the theater. Three thousand Christians burned in a Roman theater in a single day! The Christians didn't like it. What wonder that when the Christian religion came into power in Rome one of its first official acts was to put its foot upon the theater and crush it. And that is a picture of what happened when religion and drama worked against each other.

Let the centuries roll by and take another snap-shot in England of the Middle Ages. The drama has had a rebirth in England, and it has been cradled in the church. The language of the church is Latin and the common people have not understood it. The priests, wishing to make the gospel story clear, have dramatized it. They have introduced passion-plays dealing with the life of Christ and acted them in pantomime in the church. The people have understood and asked for more. Saints' plays and mystery plays have followed. And now our picture shows a stage in the courtyard of the church, a huge crowd gathered around it. That crowd watches in reverence while a whole cycle of plays, anywhere from fifteen to fifty, is presented in sequence. They are all episodes in one great story—the story of God's relation to the human race as the story is told in the Bible from Genesis to Revelation, from the Creation to Judgment Day. Guilds of laymen are doing the acting and they have

felt free to interpret the Bible stories with a good deal of imaginative material of their own mixed in. For example, in the episode dealing with the Flood, we recognize Noah driving the animals into the ark. That has a Biblical air about it—but after the animals are in he has much greater difficulty in persuading his wife to come along. And when he finally gets her aboard he is so weary with the job that he comes forward and urges the young men in the audience to be warned and take their wives in hand early in life and "chastise thare tong." Mrs. Noah thereupon comes forward and warns the ladies that if they are wise they will never marry at all. Now this seems to have been left out of the Bible which we know. Nevertheless it represents an interpretation of a Bible story in terms of the experience of medieval England, and the people understand it and like it and want more.

Before we pass from this picture, look at the stage on which some of these old dramas were presented. A curious affair—a plain wooden platform with two stories, one for dressing-room, the other for action. At one end are the pearly gates of heaven, at the other, the flaming jaws of hell-mouth. And note that at the end of the play all the good characters go into the pearly gates of heaven, and all the bad characters into the jaws of hell.* Very simple, isn't it? But for all its crudity and *naïveté* it is rather an effective attempt of religion and drama to work together to make life more interesting and abundant.

Our next snap-shot is taken in the year 1643. It is a

* The bad characters wore costumes of black and orange, which inspired a student to write, in an examination paper, "the damned souls who went to hell all wore the Princeton colors."

picture of some men going about the city of London and tacking upon the doors of every theater a notice to the effect that the theater is closed by ordinance of the Lords and Commons because the public stage has become "subversive of public morals." One of the excesses of Puritanism? Yes, in part, it is the result of religion that has gone sour. But not entirely. The stage has been going to excesses in the other direction. It has made sport of sacred things. It has been irreverent and obscene. It has scoffed at decency and integrity. All in all, our picture is one of a time when religion and drama are working against each other.

How did it come to pass that religion and drama, which were helping one another so happily in the fourteenth century, should be quarreling so bitterly in the seventeenth? The answer is complicated, of course, but one old legend throws a bit of light upon it. According to this legend, Punch and Judy is a contraction of Pontius Pilate and Judas Iscariot. And this is how the contraction came about. Pontius Pilate and Judas Iscariot were two great tragic personalities which appeared in all the old mystery cycles when they were presented on that queer stage in the courtyards of the churches. But in time some one thought of putting that stage on wheels and rolling it out to other parts of the city and even into the provinces where the crowds could see it who couldn't or wouldn't come to church. That made the first pageant —for the word *pageant* means "rolling platform." Now when the plays were taken out over the city on these rolling platforms, they drew crowds. The inn-keepers saw these crowds and realized that here was a chance for business. So they appealed to the actors and said in

substance, "Here, if you will come and present your plays in the courtyard of the inn, we will see that you have food and drink and lodging." The players were human and consented. So in time the plays were presented in the courtyard of the inns instead of in the courtyards of the churches. But the audiences were different. The audiences about the church had come in a spirit of reverence and worship. The audiences about the inn had come for amusement and hilarity. These audiences around the inns were a great deal more interested in the characters who went into the flaming jaws of hell at the end of the play than in those who went into the pearly gates of heaven. The players in those days had a great deal more to do with their lines than they have since. They began to change their lines and their interpretation of character to meet the demands of these inn audiences for more laughter and more fun. And so in the course of a century or more these great tragic characters Pontius Pilate and Judas Iscariot introduced buffoonery into their parts, making them comic rather than tragic. And then in the course of further years they became mere puppets—Punch and Judy.

This legend is probably not historical. But it is as true to the inner sequence of events in the theater as though it were. For this is certain: the drama of medieval England lost its sense of being a mirror of the soul, it became a show-business, and then, in spite of the tremendous influence of Marlowe and Shakspere to the contrary, a thing of questionable value and decency. Religion lost its appreciation of the dramatic struggles of human life, became dogmatic and other-worldly, and went around not only kicking wickedness out of high places, but also

kicking beauty out of the churches and pleasure out of human life.

Enough of these snap-shots of history. Here we are in the twentieth century. We need no pictures now, for we can use our own eyes. And what do we see? Religion at a crisis. Drama at a crisis. Churches complaining of decreasing attendance, and bemoaning the decline of their authority; theaters struggling for existence and wondering what sort of show-business to tackle next to make money and make it quick. History is repeating itself before our eyes. *The question is: which history shall it be—the history of religion and drama working together or religion and drama working against each other? That question is for us to answer. And a good bit of the spiritual history of this century will be determined by the answer we give during the next few years.*

Let us look at the situation in our churches and our theaters a little more closely. Let us see what forces are operating to make religion and drama work together for the benefit of mankind, and what forces are operating to drive them apart and to work against each other.

Take first the situation in our theaters. Mr. James Agate, dramatic critic for the London *Times,* in his book *A Short View of the English Stage* thus describes it as it was four years ago: "A large part of the London theater is given up to plays about dope fiends and jazz-maniacs; other large tracts are abandoned to the inanities of musical comedy. Roughly speaking, three-fourths of the London stage is closed to persons possessed of the slightest particle of intellect or the least feeling for the drama." That description would apply to the stage of nearly any American city as well as Lon-

don, and to-day as well as in 1926. But it is *only one side* of the story. Mr. Agate goes on to point out that fifteen years ago there was only one intellectual theater in London, and in 1926 there were a half-dozen. England can point with pride not only to the half-dozen in London but to Sir Barry Jackson's repertory theater in Birmingham and Mr. William Armstrong's in Liverpool and many others. America has its Theatre Guild which serves not only New York but four or five other cities as well. And during the past three years Miss Eva Le Gallienne at the Civic Repertory theater in New York has demonstrated that she can make the best drama popular at box-office prices about half those charged at the regular Broadway theaters. In Chicago—hot-bed of crime according to the papers—three Shaksperean companies played simultaneously to capacity houses in the winter of 1928–29 in three of the largest theaters of the city.

What is the meaning of these extremes of evidence —part pointing toward the decay of the theater and part toward the Golden Age? The meaning is this: there is a bloody battle going on between a group of men who control large areas of the theater and are interested in drama for revenue only and another smaller group who look upon drama as an art whose duty and privilege it is to mirror the struggles of human souls. The first group are the spiritual descendants of the old inn-keeper crowd of the Middle Ages. The second group are the spiritual children of the old Greek poets. The first group care only for shows that will make quick money, and these are usually shows that provide an escape from life. The second group, like true artists, care for drama

which provides *not an escape but an interpretation* of life. The inn-keeper crowd give us crook plays, obscene plays, farces and musical comedies of a frothy sort. The artist crowd give us the plays of Shaw, Barrie, Galsworthy, Sutton Vane, Drinkwater, Masefield, O'Neill, Philip Barry and R. C. Sherriff. Between the inn-keeper crowd and the artists the battle is joined. The issue of that battle is the life or death of the drama as an art. The victory will go in the long run as you and I and our fellow citizens vote at the box-offices.

If the artists' battle against the inn-keepers were entirely confined to the regular theaters, we might feel pessimistic over the prospect. But it is not. Many of them in America and England have set up Little Theaters half-professional and half-amateur. It is a rare city in America which does not have its little theater to-day. It may be housed in a stable or an old saloon, a box-car or an abandoned grocery store. It may have only cheese-cloth for curtains and more cheese-cloth for costumes. Its lighting may consist of only a half-dozen smoky lanterns, of which some one said, "If we had a few more of them, we would have absolute darkness." Its treasury may be microscopic. But for all that it has youth and enthusiasm and vision. It is producing the classics and new plays with thumb-tacks and gusto. Mr. Kenneth Macgowan in his book, *Footlights across America*, estimates that there are "at least 1000 groups that give one or two plays each season, 6000 high schools that produce as part of their class work anywhere from one bill of short plays to 25 bills of long and short, and 6000 more high schools with dramatic clubs that give at least one play a year." This movement has already given to the

world such artists as Stanislawski, Reinhardt, Synge, and Brieux in Europe, and O'Neill and Paul Green in America. It has also given us the Theatre Guild. Any movement that can bear such fruit must have the divine spark in it. The inn-keeper crowd may kill the regular theaters for us—but these young people will raise it from the dead!

And now let us turn to the present situation in religion, mindful that our view must not be limited to any one sect or denomination. In every division of Christianity and Judaism to-day there are two main groups, one looking upon religion as a means of escape from the miseries of human life, and the other looking upon religion as a source of power to help us understand these miseries, to battle with them, and transform them into blessings. It is not in our province here to weigh one philosophy against the other. But when we come to consider these groups with relation to drama, we find a distinct difference. The first group, which is and always has been by far the larger, takes little interest in drama except in certain forms of liturgy and pageantry which provide esthetic clothing for worship. But the second group—those who look upon religion as an interpretation of life and a source of power for the battles of life—these are showing to-day a remarkable interest in drama and their interest has expressed itself in a rather amazing evolution in the use of dramatic forms in churches.

More than a thousand American churches now have dramatic groups. If Chicago churches are typical, the number is much larger. For a study of the sixty-five leading churches in that city revealed that fifty-six of them were producing religious plays last winter. Those

fifty-six had produced two hundred dramas and pageants during the year.

Most modern churches began with pageantry, presenting certain great ideas in the form of living pictures accompanied by music. But they did not stop with pageantry. They wanted to portray *character,* and so they turned to drama which centers around character as pageantry centers around ideas. They dramatized Bible stories to help the children of the Sunday-schools to recover the experience of the old Bible characters and to understand better the struggles they went through. From Bible stories they passed on to revived mystery plays and to ancient and modern moralities. The Canterbury festival, in presenting *Everyman* and *Dr. Faustus,* exemplified this stage of the evolution. Next they developed plays of the mission fields, plays that have been a powerful aid in making real those fields and the struggles of our missionaries. But they could not stop there. This group has now reached the place where it is asking for strong modern dramas, with all the humor and imagination possible, portraying the emotional and spiritual conflicts of human life, and shedding upon them the light of religion.

In this evolution the experience of the churches gradually gave a new definition to religious drama. In the beginning it was somehow felt that a religious drama must talk much about religion, and about Christ and the church. It must use Biblical characters and, to a large extent, Biblical stories. But in the course of the years we have come to see that what makes a play religious is not the material it deals with but *the total effect of the play upon the audience.* If a play sends an audience away

exalted in spirit, with a deeper sense of fellowship with God and man, it has been religious. But if it does not have that effect, it is not religious although all its characters are Biblical and its story is taken from the Bible itself. The churches have presented many an irreligious Bible play, and the theaters many a religious modern one. *Jephthah's Daughter* is a fair example of an irreligious Biblical play, while Shaw's *St. Joan,* and Sherriff's *Journey's End* are examples of modern plays that have a religious effect.

It may not be inappropriate here to give a somewhat personal illustration of an experiment made in 1928 at the Chicago Theological Seminary. We had introduced drama into the curriculum of the institution three years ago not only as a natural outcome of the interpretation-of-life philosophy, but as a means of developing the imaginative and creative life of students. At first we stuck to the study and presentation of the best plays of the old Greeks and of the Middle Ages and of modern times. Then the students began to write their own plays, and we presented the best of them on the campus of the University of Chicago and in the churches of the city. In 1928, however, we ventured a bit further. One day the professor of social ethics brought into my office a bundle of case studies and survey reports that his students had prepared. "That stuff," he said, "is full of emotional dynamite. It's drama in the raw. I'd like to see it presented as a real play." I read over those manuscripts. He had been having his class study social ethics by sending them out into the dairy district which extends over an area with a 100-mile radius about the city of Chicago. They had studied the conflict which was on be-

tween the farmers who produced the milk for the city and the corporations who bought the milk and sold it to the city consumers. The farmers were complaining that they were receiving less than the cost of production; they couldn't send their children to college, nor maintain a decent standard of living at home. They were going bankrupt. The companies were contending that they were already charging the consumers all that the traffic would bear and they couldn't afford to pay any more. Whatever the merits of the contention, one thing seemed certain: the farmers were failing economically, and their failure was being followed by a spiritual despair. The reports of the students gave study after study of individual farmers and their families. I took those reports and turned them over to a student in a play-writing course—a woman who had been brought up in that dairy region—and suggested that she refine a play out of them. When the writing and re-writing were finally finished, a class in drama production worked over it until they had it ready for public presentation. And then we presented it before a conference made up of farmers and dairymen, consumers, and representatives of the city health department. That audience saw a play which sought to present honestly and sympathetically their own struggle. It made them wipe their eyes and blow their noses. It melted some of their hardness of heart. At the end of the conference they voted that the play be presented in as many churches and school-houses as could be arranged for. Is it not apparent the value this whole process had for the students: first, gathering the material out of human life here and now; then mulling over it and seeking to interpret it; then casting it into artistic

form and entering into the various parts with understanding and sympathy; and finally holding it up before the very people whose battles it mirrored and saying, "This is what we have seen in your souls—is it true?" Here is an example of religion and drama working hand in hand with education to develop a new educational process.

So much for the situation in the churches with regard to their own use of drama. They are not using drama to make money, nor as a new wrinkle in religious education, nor simply as a means of making Bible stories interesting to children. They are using it because they regard religion as a source of power for the struggles of human life and the drama as a means of interpreting those struggles artistically. *They are using it in a deliberate attempt to develop strength, beauty and power in the imaginative and creative life of the players and the audiences.* It is no fad; its roots go down to the beginnings of religion and drama. Its immediate warrant lies in the need of our times for a spiritual ministry to the esthetic and emotional life of our people. Its fruit is in human lives enriched in understanding, sympathy, and fellowship.

What next? It is time for the people in the churches who feel this way about drama, and for the artists of the theaters who regard their work religiously, to work together. I should like to suggest two ways in which cooperation would be of far-reaching importance and significance.

The first is for the churches to organize themselves in such a way that they can give prompt support to the plays of the better sort. A start at this sort of thing has

been made in New York by the Church and Drama League. Its officers are leaders in the church and artists in the theaters. They got together four years ago and adopted this statement as a basis for coöperation: "Recognizing the power of drama to influence human ideals and conduct, we believe it to be not only our obligation but our privilege to work for a wider appreciation and support of dramatic art as a creative force and to seek its employment for educational ends and the pursuit of social and spiritual culture." Since then they have been issuing weekly bulletins, very small and concise and to the point, recommending to their constituency the plays most worthy of support. These bulletins are prepared by an able and broad-minded critic and are used by thousands as a theater guide. If some such organization as that could be in every city which has a good theater, it would be a godsend to the artists in their struggle to hold on to the best in drama in spite of the domination and competition of the innkeeper crowd.

My second suggestion is an appeal to experienced dramatists of the theater to write plays for church use. We have a few good plays—but *not half enough* to meet the demand. We want plays that are simple in their requirements for production and not beyond the ability of amateurs to play. But we want great plays for all that. Not propaganda plays. Not preachy plays. Not pious plays. We want plays of character and action, of humor and imagination, of beauty and power. Not plays that talk a lot about Christ, but plays with characters who *do* Christlike deeds.

Is there some dramatist within the reach of these

words? Let me write directly to him. Have you dreamed of some day writing a play so true to the deeper harmonies of human life that when people see it, it will start the bells ringing in their own hearts? Have you hoped some day to write a play in which you would put real characters under the pressure of such a crisis that it would break them open and show the divinity within? Many of our playwrights have broken open their characters but found only a devil inside. Are you strong enough to break them deeper and find the divinity? Have you longed in your quiet moments for the insight and the ability to write a play so sympathetic with the hopes and frailities and aspirations of the common people that they will cherish it next their hearts as they cherish the poetry of Robert Burns? Write that play now and dedicate it to the young people of the churches who are learning through drama to reverence human personality as the temple of God. You may be the one of whom Dean Inge writes. "When this new prophet comes," he says, "I think he will choose to speak to his generation not from the pulpit, nor from the platform, nor from the printed page, but from the stage. A great dramatist might help us find our souls."

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